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The Wild Becoming of Childhood: Writing as Monument in Nina Bouraoui's *Sauvage*

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Abstract

This article explores the writing of childhood in *Sauvage* (2011) by contemporary francophone writer Nina Bouraoui, a text that narrates the experiences of fourteen-year old Alya in Algeria, as she struggles to comprehend the disappearance of her friend, Sami. The article analyses the depiction of childhood in the text as a state of unbounded wildness, interpreting this wildness as a kind of 'becoming' as understood by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. It further draws on the work of these thinkers in examining the relationship between childhood memories and writing in the text, in which temporality is dislocated and the past is enfolded into the present, creating a kind of 'monument' to childhood.

Keywords

Becoming

Bouraoui

Deleuze

Guattari

Memory

Monument

Rhizome

Sauvage

Wildness

Writing

Introduction

Born in Rennes in 1967 to a French mother and an Algerian father, Nina Bouraoui spent much of her childhood in Algiers, before leaving at an adolescent age to live in Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates and France, where she currently resides. Her first novel, *La Voyeuse interdite*, appeared in 1991 and she has since published twelve further texts to critical acclaim, winning the prestigious Prix du Livre Inter for *La Voyeuse interdite* and Prix Renaudot for *Mes mauvaises pensées*.¹ Over the past two decades, Bouraoui's literary works have captured the attention of a wide-ranging audience, and her distinctive style and treatment of contemporary themes have established the author at the forefront of recent experiments in French literature, as well within new trends in French women's writing into the twenty-first century.

As for many of her contemporaries, Bouraoui's writing is anchored in self-expression and the narrative 'je' takes a prominent place in her largely autofictional texts. Narrators (generally female) struggle with the cultural containers of identity in which they are placed, in pursuit of more fluid ways to articulate their sense of self beyond binary terms. The following comment by the narrator of *Garçon manqué* signals a refrain that resounds throughout Bouraoui's work, whose meditations on subjectivity circulate around how the complexities of ethnicity and sexuality might be rendered in and through language: 'J'ai quatre problèmes. Française? Algérienne? Fille? Garçon?'² In Bouraoui's writing, borders, be they political or personal, are experienced as culturally and historically constructed lines of constraint that multiply

positions of alterity when crossed or transgressed. Melancholy and illness cloak the subject, whose narration charts passages towards the possibilities of recovery, recuperation and the reconciliation of alterity.³ In the earlier texts, these possibilities are often framed by unconscious currents of guilt and shame embedded in liminal subjectivity, which does not easily fit into the broader socio-cultural fabric or master narratives of identity. Increasingly, however, the kaleidoscopic nature of cultural identity, the affective nature of non-normative sexuality, and the vitality of desire have emerged as more hopeful themes in Bouraoui's recent texts.

Much of Bouraoui's work is concerned with the evocation of childhood experience and her assertion that *'l'enfance est un pays aussi'*⁴ designates childhood as a geographical landscape that might be explored or excavated. Childhood in her writing appears to be as much a departed land as the postcolonial Algeria she grew up in, and many of the complex feelings of displacement and alienation described in moving between North Africa and Europe are reflected in transitions between child and adult. This is not to suggest, however, that childhood is associated with an uncritically nostalgic or utopian vision of Algeria. Indeed, in the vein of authors such as Hélène Cixous, Mohammed Dib, Leïla Sebbar and others,⁵ Bouraoui's writing of Algerian childhood evokes exuberance and vitality, just as it exposes the tensions and unease of children who struggle to find their place in an environment characterised by the violence of colonialism, the War of Independence, and their ongoing social and political legacies. In Bouraoui's writing, then, childhood emerges as a conflictual landscape. On the one hand, it evokes vibrancy and possibility, ideals that are often out of sight within the narrowly restrictive view of the adult Algerian world with its socio-political containers. On the other hand, childhood is the place of fear, confusion and chaos. Yet, in Bouraoui's writing, these two perspectives coalesce to form a

vision of childhood as ultimately a place of unbounded wildness. As she admits in an interview, ‘J’ai toujours été fascinée par la jeunesse et sa sensualité. C’est un état sauvage où on a l’impression que la sexualité va définir notre personnalité.’⁶ In a manner that is perhaps reminiscent of the Surrealists, then, childhood is linked with the wild flux of the real, with sexuality, its desires, fears and anxieties.

Bouraoui’s most recent text, *Sauvage*, particularly pays homage to this wild state of childhood. *Sauvage* is set as the year turns from 1979 to 1980 and is narrated by fourteen-year old Alya, who lives in Algiers with her family. Alya’s close childhood friend, Sami, has recently disappeared: nobody knows where he is, what has happened to him, and a police investigation has unearthed no clues. Unable to talk about her loss or to grieve, Alya takes to writing to excavate the past and explore the present, writing both about Sami and for him: ‘Alors j’ai décidé d’écrire tous les jours dans mon cahier. De tout raconter pour Sami. Pour qu’il sache. Parce que c’est vrai que c’est important les mots, ça reste quand nos idées s’envolent déjà.’⁷ *Sauvage* is thus composed of the fragments of memories of Alya and Sami’s childhood that she weaves into the fabric of her continuing present reality without Sami, creating a lasting written text for her friend. In its analysis of the text, this article is interested in exploring two, related thematic strands. It will read these alongside the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as a means to illuminate the wildness of childhood that multiplies positions of subjectivity beyond the politically charged adult labels and systems of meaning that are resonant in Bouraoui’s writing with the legacy of conflict and symbolic violence in Algeria. Firstly, it explores Alya’s narration of the traces of her time with Sami, reading these experiences as reflecting an in-between rhizomatic space of becoming. Secondly, it considers the relationship between past and present in the creation of childhood memories, and suggests that Bouraoui’s text sets up a sort of

monument to childhood experience. However, this is not a monument that fixes memories of Sami, and of Sami and Alya's childhood together, and binds them to an immutable location in space or time. Rather, it is, and again following Deleuze and Guattari, a monument that wants to keep the past, and the unbounded experience of childhood, perpetually fluid and present.

Intertwining child into world

From the opening pages of *Sauvage*, Alya presents a world governed by fear, for as the year 1980 approaches it fills those around her with a sense of impending apocalypse. As Alya writes, 'On attend une catastrophe mais on ne sait pas de quel côté elle va surgir' (p. 12). Thoughts of the religious, technological, political and other forms that this catastrophe might take swirl in Alya's mind, but the fear of the unknown that weighs down on the atmosphere in Algiers is bound up with the very systems of representation that are associated with the world of adults in Algeria – political tensions, the rise of religious fundamentalism, and technological advances are all related to ways of codifying and containing experience. By contrast, Alya's own fear is of her insertion into these systems of representation that eclipse the particularity of experience through the inexorable march of time into social and political systems:

La marche du temps. C'est comme un écrasement de savoir cela. D'être obligée de suivre les autres, l'accepter pour devenir une vraie personne, c'est-à-dire une personne qui trouve sa place, qui s'inscrit dans ce monde et qui participe, avec les autres, à la marche, sans jamais pouvoir l'arrêter, ou lui faire changer de sens. (p. 33)

Though Alya often, and here too, also describes this sense of a charted path in terms of more mystical forces, and 'la rotation des planètes' (p. 33), these ideas appear to open out her imagination, and it is when the onwards march of time relates to systems

of meaning that there is a sense of constraint. There is always an ending, always a meaning, her father tells her, one must take one's place in society and in the grand march. His words echo in Alya's mind to the extent that she is convinced of Sami's eventual return, simply because his continued absence would make no sense. 'Je sais qu'il finira par arriver,' she tells herself, 'Parce que tout finit par arriver. Que les choses du monde et de la vie sont construites ainsi. Pour aboutir. Parce qu'il n'y a pas de hasard. Que tout a une signification' (p. 38). And yet, for Alya, there will be no ending, no meaning or final signification, because Sami does not return and for this there is no explanation.

At the age of fourteen in a transitional realm between child and adult, Alya takes refuge in the proximity of her childhood, where identities and experiences appear to resist the significations that are ascribed to them in the politically codified environment of the adult world. Rather than being incorporated into 'la marche du temps' (p. 33) or being bound to the finality of resolutions, endings and meanings, childhood experience in *Sauvage* is instead rhizomatic and inhabited in between positions. Deleuze and Guattari describe the rhizome as interrupting the possibility of 'aboutir':

Un rhizome ne commence et n'aboutit pas, il est toujours au milieu, entre les choses inter-êtrer, *intermezzo* [...] *Entre* les choses ne déguise pas une relation localisable qui va de l'une à l'autre et réciproquement, mais une direction perpendiculaire, un mouvement transversal qui les emporte l'une et l'autre, ruisseau sans début ni fin, qui ronge des deux rives et prend de la vitesse au milieu.⁸

In the notion of rhizomatic becoming, experience is not configured through terms that determine either one thing or another, but through encounters and the space of the in-between. Visions of the child that emerge in *Sauvage* mobilize a wild becoming of childhood in this sense, as experience is unharnessed, and multiple affects jostle with

one another. Like the adults, Sami and Alya too hold fear within them, but the child's fear carries a markedly different flavour to the adult's. For rather than being opposed to pleasure, fear intertwines with it. 'On avait la peur chaude en nous,' Alya writes, 'Pas celle qui paralyse, mais celle qui donne du plaisir' (p. 16). Alya's experience of childhood is associated with the mingling of extremes, and she likens it to the musical merging of light and violence in a Pink Floyd song (p. 45). Within the transversal movements of childhood, sadness and joy coexist as Alya sheds tears 'pour la beauté du monde et pour son imperfection' (p. 47), and as Sami finds desire in danger, and death in life (p. 22). Resisting taxonomy, childhood gives rise to possibility, through an intertwining of the child with the vital materiality of the world. As Alya writes, 'les éléments me portent et me donnent de la force pour affronter les humains' (p. 39). The wildness of childhood is characteristic of Bouraoui's oeuvre as children run, ferociously, vivaciously, hurling themselves into an intimate relationship with the flux of the real. This image is recurrent in *Sauvage* too, as Alya and Sami pretend to be dingoes and gain a sense of the freedom that the wild becoming of childhood offers in its affective intermingling with the elements of Algeria, rather than its political landscape: 'On était ivres. À cause du soleil, de la mer, des vagues, du vent, du ciel et à cause de bien plus encore. On était ivres du monde, d'être au monde, dans ce monde, ivres de la vie, d'être en vie, de faire partie de cette vie, cela nous rendait fous' (p. 224).

This intertwining of child and world reflects a kind of torsion, then, whereby rather than the (adult) subject standing in front of the terrain in a position of Cartesian judgement and knowledge, there is a folding of one into the other (child into world) and a disruption of thought as systematic representation of experience. This would resonate with a Deleuzian philosophy of transcendental empiricism where subjectivity

is formed through folding, and an involuted encounter with the flux of the real: ‘Plier-déplier ne signifie plus simplement tendre-détendre, contracter-dilater, mais envelopper-développer, involuer-évoluer.’⁹ Significantly, on several occasions in the text, Alya refers to other worlds and otherworldliness in which the infinity and sheer boundlessness of the universe remains irreducible to thought and open to possibility, ‘dans l’autre monde tout semblait possible et surtout plus mystérieux’ (p. 28). In *Sauvage*, this sense of the other world retains a close connection with the universe of childhood in its speed, flux and resistance to adult symbolization. ‘Je voulais rejoindre un autre monde, plus rapide, plus puissant, plus lumineux’, Alya writes, ‘Un monde de vitesse. Un monde de féerie. Un monde où l’on n’aurait plus besoin des mots, des signes, du langage, pour se faire comprendre, pour se faire entendre, pour exister. Un monde où chaque cœur se reconnaîtrait, et se lirait. Un monde extralucide.’ (pp. 56-7) This world beyond signification resonates with the space of childhood and thus moves beyond the specificity of the Algerian political and geographical landscape; it does not seek to render in words that which is inexplicable and instead remains open to element and to affect.

If Bouraoui’s *Sauvage* presents an elegiac portrayal of the wild becoming of childhood, it nonetheless alerts the reader to the complex ethical implications of inhabiting a universe beyond politicized systems of signification. For if the wildness of childhood collapses meanings into transversal movements, if affective experience intermingles a spectrum of positions, and questions remain unanswerable, this reaches a devastating apex in the dénouement of the text. Alya’s sense of responsibility for Sami’s disappearance is gradually revealed in fragments though never fully addressed until the reader reaches the final pages of *Sauvage*. A resounding sentiment that she has carried is that Sami has disappeared because he wants to escape the adult world,

having been plunged into a position of responsibility in responding to the needs of his emotionally unstable mother (p. 90). But if childhood has offered this space of intertwining with the flux of the universe without being tied down to meanings, this is a space that lacks ethical responsibility, something that is suggested in Sami's desire to hold onto childhood and ultimately revealed in a startling incident where Sami witnesses Alya drowning, chooses to do nothing about it, and walks away (pp. 227-9). Alya is rescued, but never talks to Sami about the incident and now suspects that his disappearance may be related to feelings of remorse and a self-imposed exile. In the wild becoming of childhood, then, where the child intertwines with the world, death intertwines with life, and meanings are collapsed, ethics are disturbingly troubled. For as Alya writes, 'Dans l'enfance on ne sait pas bien séparer le mal du bien. On ne voit pas la différence. Il n'y a pas de limite, ou alors elle est très mince' (p. 103). If childhood, for Bouraoui, enables possibility, this does not relate to the wide-eyed innocence of the child or an unequivocally utopian vision of childhood, but to a wildness of possibility that carries no restraint, where the indeterminacy of meaning opens out systems of thought, but also raises significant ethical concerns.

Writing monumentally

Alya is unable to relate this particular incident until the end of the text, as she feels it will mark an end to her story, perhaps an end to Sami himself. Alya decides that she will never ask any questions about what has happened, and, in so doing, she will ensure that 'il y aura une distorsion entre le présent et le passé' (p. 217). If writing is a way of keeping Sami alive, if the ending of her story 'marquera peut-être la fin de Sami' (p. 201), then, Alya's text itself strives to resist questioning and judgment and to achieve this very sense of distortion between the present and the past. Torsion

might again be read in terms of folding, here of present into past, and past into present, enfolding any sense of the conflict between Sami and Alya, unfolding the more positive associations with the past, and with the wildness of childhood.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that becoming is, in a sense, anti-memory,¹⁰ and further that art, in creating rhizomatic connections to experience and to the world, participates in the same sense of folding past and present into one another. Their notion of art as a monument rests not on memory or memorialization, then, but on fabulation:

Il est vrai que toute oeuvre d'art est un monument, mais le monument n'est pas ici ce qui commémore un passé, c'est un bloc de sensations présentes qui ne doivent qu'à elles-mêmes leur propre conversation, et donnent à l'événement le composé qui le célèbre. L'acte du monument n'est pas la mémoire, mais la fabulation. On n'écrit pas avec des souvenirs d'enfance, mais par des blocs d'enfance qui sont des devenirs-enfant du présent.¹¹

In *Savage*, Alya is reluctant to use words such as 'mémoire' and 'souvenir' that would add a sense of finality to Sami's existence and consign him resolutely to the past (p. 148). Her text does not want to commemorate, then, but to set up a monument in Deleuze and Guattari's sense of the word. Alya is deeply conscious of the weight of signification, and the density of words (p. 36, p. 211), and her writing does not want to fix, explain or judge the past, but to create connections to Sami and to the otherworldliness of childhood in a movement that displaces time. For Alya, memory is inventive (p. 202), and the imagination offers ways to keep Sami and her childhood within the perpetual present.

As a space of becoming, childhood itself in *Savage* already participates in suspended time, and this is encapsulated for Alya in Sami himself: '[s]ouvent je me dis que Sami a peut-être trouvé la façon d'arrêter le temps' (p. 35). Alya's narrative too evokes this timeless quality in the composition of the text, which

suspends onward movement by weaving different fragments of experience into a continuous narrative that moves back and forth across time. The text throws up visions of the vitality of childhood which are suddenly interposed with the adolescent perspective of Alya who tells herself ‘que mon enfance est très loin, que c’est comme si elle n’avait jamais existé’ (p. 116). But temporality collapses in Alya’s writing, and childhood bursts out not through conscious recall, but through affect, music, smell (p. 63, p. 79) that create intimate connections between past and present. By drawing closely together different pieces of experience to create a patchwork of the past and present, Alya’s narrative keeps Sami and childhood alive and projects them into the future, ‘[p]arce que pour moi Sami aura toujours un avenir’ (p. 148).

For Alya, as for Deleuze and Guattari, art is not representation, but a productive, creative act that branches out beyond the immediacy of reality, itself proved to be insufficient: ‘j’ai pensé que j’avais toujours besoin de construire des histoires dans ma tête, que la réalité ne me suffisait pas’ (p. 57). As for Deleuze and Guattari, too, art multiplies experience beyond temporality, and composes affects and sensations that take the place of words (p. 96). At one point in the text, Alya creates a collage composed of multiplied black lines, and, in so doing, she senses a connection to an almost divine space beyond reality (p. 96). But this creative act seems to involve an intertwining of Alya with the flux of the universe, rather than a divine message as such. ‘Les lignes noires qui s’enchêvêtrent sont mes idées,’ she writes, and her lines appear as rhizomatic branchings to the world, that deterritorialize perceived relations of existence and the universe. Becoming, for Deleuze and Guattari, involves deterritorialization ‘d’après des lignes distinctes enchêvêtrées’¹² and Alya’s lines resonate with a notion of becoming whereby art enables a new perception of the

world, intertwining with the subject and enfolding both into the world: ‘des idées sur la force qui fait que nous sommes en vie, que nous sommes là, que nous sommes arrivés dans un monde qui, même s’il n’est pas toujours à notre image, est fait de nous, de nos forces et de nos faiblesses’ (p. 96).

If art intertwines with the world rather than representing it, Alya’s preferred creative activity is, however, writing, since she has ‘plus de mots que de lignes ou d’angles brisés’ (p. 126). In *Sauvage*, the possibilities of writing are highlighted in contrast with the visual images of photography and film, which harness or falsify experience. Photographs stultify the past through clichés, or by recording experiences that were not perceived as important at the time (p. 221), but also by fixing the future and determining what will be remembered (p. 52). As Alya’s grandmother claims, some experiences will always exceed the simplicity of the image (p. 192). It is only writing, then, that offers Alya the capacity to create a connection to the past, to Sami, and to childhood, that remains fluid within the present, that dislocates temporality and carries forward the unsettled and unsettling flux of childhood. ‘Chacun va vers son monument,’ Alya writes, ‘Et chacun trouve son chemin, le meilleur chemin vers son monument qui est un petit monument mais un monument quand même’ (p. 155). Alya is not writing of the monument here in terms that explicitly relate to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion. The monument here represents a moment of victory, of making sense of one’s life, and is experienced after a period of illness. Yet, Deleuze and Guattari’s idea seems so relevant. For it is in creating a monument, in writing, that Alya is able, in some way, to make sense of Sami and of her childhood, not in the sense of arriving at meanings and explanations, ‘pour aboutir’, but in folding, through art, the different elements of experience into one another.

Conclusion

Bourauoui's *Sauvage* raises fascinating questions about the vitality of experience, and the ways in which it may, or may not, be made meaningful. Exploring childhood in the text opens out the flux of life in its wild becoming that pulsates and resists the systems of representation that structure the Algerian socio-political landscape. That the wildness of childhood invokes danger, instability and pain alongside possibility and positivity may raise ethical concerns about the unbinding of meaning, but Alya's intent is not to judge Sami's actions or wild nature of childhood, rather to create a space of dialogue and encounter where the fullness of experience might be evoked, rather than bracketed into containers of meaning. In keeping with Bourauoui's claim that 'l'enfance est un pays aussi', then, Alya's narrative offers a sideways rather than backwards glance towards childhood, remapping the terrain, creating cartographic encounters in which art, subjectivity and elements of Algerian experience intertwine, resisting the violent codification and containment of the real, enfolding and unfolding the past within the dislocated flux of the present. In creating a 'bloc d'enfance', or a monument, 'il est déterritorialisant; il se déplace dans le temps, avec le temps, pour réactiver le désir et en faire proliférer les connexions'.¹³

¹ Nina Bourauoui, *La Voyeuse interdite* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), *Mes mauvaises pensées* (Paris: Stock, 2005).

² Nina Bourauoui, *Garçon manqué* (Paris: Stock, 2000), p. 163.

³ See Helen Vassallo, 'Unsuccessful Alterity? The Pursuit of Otherness in Nina Bourauoui's Life Writing', *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 12.2 (2009), 37-53; 'Wounded Storyteller: Illness as Life Narrative in Nina Bourauoui's *Garçon manqué*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 43.1 (2007), 46-56.

⁴ 'Entretien', *Delirium*, http://delirium.lejournal.free.fr/interview_nina_bouraoui.html [accessed 2 November 2008].

⁵ See, for example, Leïla Sebbar (ed.), *Une enfance algérienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

⁶ Lucie Geffroy, 'Quand Nina Bouraoui parle des hommes', *Magazine 360°* (11 June 2007), http://www.360.ch/presse/2007/06/quand_nina_bouraoui_parle_des_hommes.php [accessed 16 June 2009].

⁷ Nina Bouraoui, *Sauvage* (Paris: Stock, 2011), p. 14.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie: Mille plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), p. 37.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Le Pli: Leibniz et le Baroque* (Paris: Minuit, 1988), p. 13.

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie: Mille plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), p. 360.

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Minuit, 1991), p. 158.

¹² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie: Mille plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), p. 45.

¹³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Minuit, 1975), p. 141.